

“You’re selling a brand”: Marketing commercial sex online

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Abstract

Sex work has undergone a change, with the rise of the internet economy with more ‘middle class’ sex workers coming into the industry. In this paper, I explore the social status hierarchy within online direct-contact commercial sex work in New Zealand. I draw on findings from an in-depth qualitative investigation of online sex work, undertaken between 2017 and 2018. I took a participatory approach, working closely with NZPC – Aotearoa New Zealand Sex Workers’ Collective to provide an understanding of two interrelated issues: the role web platforms play in shaping the social status of sex workers who advertise for clients online; and how sex workers brand and market themselves online. The findings suggest that sex workers strive to represent themselves as authentic in their marketing to enhance social status. Furthermore, the web platform on which over 90% of indoor sex workers in New Zealand advertise has embedded a status system among sex workers through the advertising packages they offer. Social status has thus become the most powerful marketing tool indoor direct-contact sex workers have to stand out from their competitors and attract sufficient clients to make a liveable income.

Keywords

sex work, internet, marketing, personal brand, social status hierarchy

Introduction

Sex work was decriminalised in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ) in 2003. All sex workers who are permanent residents and citizens are, as a result, able to work openly in the sex

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industry. Most direct-contact sex workers who work indoors (either privately or in a brothel) advertise online. This paper aims to firstly, add to the scant literature on online advertising for commercial sex in a decriminalised environment, but primarily aims to contribute to the discussion on status hierarchies/whorearchies amongst online direct-contact sex workers.

The Fight Online Sex Trafficking and Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Acts (FOSTA-SESTA) put in place in the United States in 2018 have limited advertising options for NZ sex workers (Tichenor, 2020; Robinson, 2018). These Acts forced the closure of Backpage, an international web platform used by many NZ sex workers to connect with clients (Macdonald, 2018; Tichenor, 2020). There are currently two other NZ-based web platforms for sex workers to advertise on.¹ One of them (hereafter called Web4me) has more than 90% of the market share, demands exclusivity, and charges significantly more for advertisements than the other platform, which is run by a sex worker (Hatton, 2018). Sex workers advertising on Web4me can select either a standard, elite, gold or diamond advertising package. Weekly advertising costs range from between NZ\$70 to NZ\$500 depending on the package. Sex workers who purchase diamond and gold packages appear on the first few pages of the site, whilst those who cannot afford this, sink to the later pages. Larger platforms, like Web4me, provide more choice and therefore attract more customers than smaller sites (Huws, 2017; Rand, 2019). This puts pressure on sex workers to advertise on these platforms and risks creating a divide in earning power as well as social status and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984).

The rise of the global online economy over the last few decades has transformed the sex industry by facilitating the entry of middle class women into indoor sex work (Ray, 2007; Brents and Sanders, 2010; Brents and Hausbeck, 2007). Bernstein (2007:480) draws on Bourdieu in arguing that middle class sex workers have utilised their cultural knowledge (the social assets that an individual possesses, such as education, way of speaking and dressing) to professionalise their activities and develop skills, investing their work ‘with a sense of personal meaning and ethical value’. They also bring this knowledge to their marketing practices. Digital technologies have created the space for advertising offline sexual services (Sanders et al., 2020) and most sex workers now market themselves online in order to compete effectively in what has become an even more intensely competitive environment (Jones, 2015b; Cunningham et al., 2018; Sanders et al., 2018). They have adopted the same marketing principles as any other online service provider. There are many blogs and websites which provide helpful tips on effective marketing and these predominantly stress the importance of authenticity in building a personal brand (e.g.: Amelia, n.d; Geek Chicago, 2020; Walden, 2020; Winstead, 2015). One marketing advice website states that authenticity in marketing ‘gives your brand personality, which is vital in any market. ... if that person can identify with the brand, its values and mission, then they are buying much more than a product – they are buying a belief’ (Winstead, 2015). Clients purchasing commercial sex services believe that elements of intimacy and connection are being purchased when adverts sound authentic (Amelia, n.d., Bernstein, 2007; Carbonero and Gómez Garrido, 2018). Middle class sex workers are more likely to have the cultural knowledge needed to build authenticity into their marketing than working or lower class sex workers (Bernstein, 2007).

They appeal to ‘professional’ clients and are able to earn more by targeting their adverts to this ‘elite’ clientele (Bernstein, 2007; Ray, 2007; Sanders, 2005).

The emergence of middle class sex workers has, thus, reinforced a hierarchical system within the commercial sex industry, often referred to as a whorearchy in many sex worker-written blogs (e.g.: Duggan, 2016; Knox, 2014; Lynn, 2019; McNeill, 2012; Sciotino, 2016). Duggan (2016) represented the whorearchy as a pyramid, with street-based sex workers at the bottom and webcammers at the top. In this pyramid, a distinction is made between indoor direct-contact sex workers, with brothel-based sex workers positioned second from the bottom and private escorts just above. However, there are hierarchies within the different strata. For instance, Jones (2015a) explored adult webcamming through both observation of a webcamming site and quantitative analysis of race and country of origin of webcammers by camscores (number of clicks received by webcam models). Hispanic and Black webcam models seldom featured in the top pages of the site and they received significantly fewer clicks than US white webcam models:

The low camscore literally places the model on the bottom of the status hierarchy. Once in this lower position on the website – a self-fulfilling prophecy emerges. We know that rising tides do not actually lift all boats. So, as those with the highest camscores remain on top, so remain those with the lowest camscores on the bottom. The imagery here should be striking – as being on the bottom of the page both symbolically and structurally reproduces racial and class-based inequalities (Jones, 2015a).

In this paper, I explore the status hierarchy within online direct-contact commercial sex work. Bourdieu (1984) argues that the stratification we see in society cannot be attributed to economics alone. Cultural (legitimate knowledge), social (relations with others) and symbolic (prestige) capital are all implicated. I therefore use the term ‘social status’ rather than ‘class’ wherever possible in my analysis. Whilst ‘social status’ encompasses cultural, social, symbolic and economic capital, class tends to only distinguish between people in terms of economics. Participants in this study also tended to use the term ‘status’ when talking about perceived differences amongst sex workers. The paper draws on data from an in-depth qualitative investigation of online direct-contact sex work, undertaken between 2017 and 2018. I address two questions in this paper: what role do web platforms play in shaping the social status of sex workers who advertise for clients online?; and how is social status claimed through branding and marketing online?

Methods

A community-based participatory approach (CBPR) informed the design of the research. CBPR is a partnership approach in which all partners contribute their own unique strengths to the research (Israel et al., 2003). I have a long and successful history in participatory research approaches with NZPC – Aotearoa New Zealand Sex Workers’ Collective. They identified the need for more research in the area of internet sex work to inform their practice. They were also involved as full partners in identifying the research questions, had input into the design of the data collection tools, the recruitment of

participants and the collection of data. The validity of research is enhanced when participation in decision-making processes is maximised as it ensures that methodological and methods choices are appropriate and relational (Bradbury and Reason, 2003; Cancian, 1992). This is acknowledged as best practice and most ethically appropriate when carrying out research in the sex industry (Benoit et al., 2005; Liamputpong, 2007). Participants are less likely to be exploited when there is power-sharing in a partnership-based research relationship and the findings of the research are more likely to reflect their perspectives (Liamputpong, 2007). Whilst the research may not directly benefit the participants in this study, it does have the potential to inform policy and practice which could make a difference for future online direct-contact sex workers. The University of Otago Human Ethics Committee granted ethics approval for the study (Ref no: 17/078).

We conducted in-depth qualitative research, interviewing a range of actors in the field of online direct-contact sex work between October and December 2017. Participants included:

- 1.six brothel operators (four female and two male);
- 2.eight clients (all male accessing female sex workers);
- 3.three sex work web platform providers (two male and one female)
- 4.and 23 female sex workers and one self-identified transsexual sex worker, all of whom advertised commercial sexual services online.

There were no set questions. We utilised a semi-structured interview guide with broad topic areas concentrating on practices, experiences and expectations relating to online direct-contact sex work and advertising. NZPC staff members, who have experience in interviewing for research projects, conducted all the interviews with brothel operators, clients and web platform providers. They also conducted interviews with nine of the sex worker participants, whilst I conducted the interviews with the remaining 15 sex worker participants. Interviews occurred in NZPC offices, in brothels and a few in meeting places mutually agreed on between the interviewer and the participant. Each participant was given NZ\$40 in appreciation of their contribution to the research.

Interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. Information that may identify the participants was removed from the transcripts and pseudonyms were provided to all participants to protect their anonymity. A thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews was undertaken, which is a method used extensively in qualitative research to identify, analyse and report patterns in data (Aronson, 1994; Braun and Clarke, 2006). Meaning is sought in the accounts and/or actions of participants, taking into account how the broader social and political context impinge on these meanings (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Holloway and Todres, 2003). The process for thematic analysis includes becoming familiar with the data through reading and rereading transcripts, before coding for features of particular analytical interest (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The coded segments of the transcripts were sorted into overarching themes and sub-themes, and then refined. This paper focuses on the overarching theme of representation of ‘self’ online. The findings are presented in two main sections: Embedding social status on web platforms, and marketing social status online.

Findings

Embedding social status on web platforms

Just over a decade ago, indoor private sex workers in New Zealand predominantly used the escort or classified sections of newspapers to advertise for clients (Abel, 2010). There was a uniformity in newspaper advertising. The adverts were short, generic and gave minimal details and there was rarely an intimation of the social status of sex workers. The internet has since largely superseded the newspapers and has become essential for the marketing of commercial sex. Participants in this study most frequently discussed three websites to advertise on. Web4me holds a dominant position – at the time of writing there were 712 female sex workers advertised on this platform. Backpage was another web platform frequently discussed. This platform only charged \$1 to advertise. The third one discussed was a new platform developed by a sex worker (hereafter referred to as SWWeb), which at the time the interviews were done was trying to break into the market by offering free advertising. There were 61 escorts, including some male escorts, advertised on this site at the time of writing.

Sex workers, brothel operators and clients in this study predominantly used Web4me because it is well known and ‘pops up first on the search engine, so obviously, you know, you’re wanting to go with them’ (Gayle, brothel operator). Appearing first is a drawcard as clients are more likely to click on that link. A participant from Web4me indicated that they were the most widely accessed platform not only because they appeared first on Google, but they had also spent a lot of money advertising their platform when it was set up so that they could capture the market:

We’re so balanced, we’re so non-judgemental, and we’re so well branded. Like 96% of all traffic that comes into our website, it comes directly to [Web4me]. They’re not finding us on Google and all that stuff. They know us. (Richard, web provider)

Web4me use threatening and coercive tactics to maintain their hold on the market. They demand exclusivity from sex workers advertising on their site and if caught advertising on a competitor’s platform, will terminate their account and block them from advertising for a 3 month period: ‘and if you want to go on another site, you have to sneakily pick up another name and that, and if they find out you’ve done it, they can blacklist you’ (Susan, sex worker). Some sex workers had used different pictures, write-up and names but within 1 day had been discovered and their profile deleted from Web4me with no reimbursement: ‘they did a body match. It was a similar name, to be clear, but it wasn’t the same name’ (Katie, sex worker). This suggests that Web4me employ people to constantly scan opposition websites. Many sex workers therefore refrained from advertising elsewhere. Indeed, although there was a lot of support for SWWeb, sex worker participants were hesitant to switch to advertising on this platform as most clients only accessed Web4me.

Web4me sell advertising packages which have a built-in status system. The most expensive packages (diamond and gold) will ensure that an individual features on the first few pages of the website. The majority of sex workers in NZ live and work in Auckland²

and have to choose whether to pay for a high-status package or take a chance that clients will scroll down and choose them. Kylie argued that on Web4me ‘you’ve got to be gold and you’re still not guaranteed that you’re going to be on top, not unless you’re - girls are paying like \$500 a week for it to be on top’. Sex workers working in smaller cities are less disadvantaged as when clients limit the search to their specific location, the list reduces to around four pages: ‘At the moment I pay \$90 a week. I used to be a gold member, so you were on the front page for \$140, but that went up to, I think, like \$170 or \$180 a week’ (Madeline, sex worker). Madeline changed her status because: ‘I think there’s 3 or 4 [pages] in Wellington of the non-Asian escorts.... and I mean they [clients] flick through and they look at everyone’s picture anyhow generally’.

The larger brothels have their own websites on which they advertise all their workers, but brothel operators also advertise their business, as well as individual workers, on commercial sex web platforms. Almost all ‘mainstream’ (i.e. large and visible) brothel operators advertise on Web4me. They suggested that Web4me was more ‘professional’ and of higher status than cheaper or free web platforms. The term ‘professional’ was used frequently by participants in this study in relation to websites and sex workers and this was always linked with high status. This immediately creates a binary amongst sex workers – professional and high status versus ‘standard’ and ‘not correct’:

The reason why we only use [Web4me] is because they’re the only professional website available that is actually utilised and managed correctly. ... Anything that’s free is not managed. If it’s not managed, it’s not correct, the timing’s not correct, the girls aren’t correct.
(Kevin, brothel operator)

Web4me gives a discount to brothel operators dependent on how many sex workers they advertise. Brothel operators have to select which sex workers they will advertise each week and at which status level. One brothel operator suggested that if the sex worker did not meet the ‘standard’ required by Web4me for diamond status, it could be declined:

We are on a package, I think it’s somewhere in the vicinity of around \$400 a week, and we advertise 28 blocks of what they call elite, which is the middle one. Actually they’ve now got a diamond class. They’ve got gold, but only certain girls are accepted into the diamond advertising and you have to spend something like \$500, perhaps a little more, but I remember being quoted the amount and thinking, just to advertise a girl in that you have to be already spending quite a lot of money, and they only accept certain girls. They did say that we did have girls of the standard that they would be happy to advertise in diamond, but we’re just not prepared to throw that much money every week. (Gayle, brothel operator)

Money was not sufficient to guarantee sex workers’ diamond status. They had to display the attributes seen as preferable and of a certain ‘standard’ by Web4me. Brothel operators also played a role in judging the ‘standard’ of sex workers. They advertised sex workers working on their premises who they deemed suitable on Web4me, and the rest on Backpage.

We've then got to make the decision, "Okay, we won't advertise her on [Web4me]. We'll advertise her on Backpage" ... but the level of clientele is a little bit low, lower class. .. Backpage also encourages more customers that want to pay less money, and some of them are maybe not as nice clients, but that's, you know, it's just, the lower you pay, the lower the quality of customer really. (Gayle, brothel operator)

Brothel operators and sex workers constructed Backpage as not professional because they were cheap. 'Free' was thus equated with low status clients and sex workers, and low status in turn inferred a lack of self-respect:

They are really scummy clientele on Backpage it's the clients that don't want protection, don't want, yeah, just really low-end budget. On Backpage a lot of the girls work out of cars and they offer no protection. (Madeline, sex worker)

Like people don't have any respect for themselves. Like it's not, there's sort of no professional on Backpage. (Rebecca, sex worker).

Some participants in this study could not attract enough clients to support a large weekly expense on Web4me. Alice, a self-described big, beautiful woman (BBW), said that she averaged one client a week and had tried advertising on Web4me for 1 week in an attempt to increase her earnings. However, because she could not afford a gold or elite status advert, she failed to get any more business than she had on Backpage and went back to that:

I looked at the fact that I needed more professional photos and I needed to have more experience with different advertisers. And so I started speaking to [Web4me] to work out how much that would be and what's involved...I did a week's worth of advertising with [Web4me] .. but I didn't get more clients. So I advertised for a week and at the end of that week, I decided to go back to free advertising at Backpage with, it's only \$1. I scrape by, yeah. I wish it was even just two bookings more a month I would be a little bit more comfortable. .. I'm not doing as financially as well I hoped I would be doing. I've been thinking about do I do another stint on [Web4me] just to try and boost things out there, do I (...) start looking at offering something else that no one else is offering that might bring in more clients? (Alice, sex worker)

It was unsustainable for Alice to pay a minimum of \$70 a week to appear on the last few pages of Web4me for one client a week. Like Alice, Judy was forced to advertise on the lower status platforms, where she also struggled to make a living:

Like I was getting really good clients, but just not enough traffic because I was on Backpage and ... because running basic ads on Backpage is free and you only pay for it if you want things, like you want your photos to be in the side bar, or you want to be bumped to the top or auto-posted automatically every day, and it's really cheap. Like you can get basically the top of the thing for like \$25 a week versus, you know, like \$150 at [Web4me]. But because it's so cheap, like it used to be a bit better 'cos it was less popular, but guys could still kind of find it,

but I think [Web4me] kept putting up a lot of their pricing for the different tiers and like changing it around. Like they introduced like diamond tier, which is literally \$1000 a week [sic]. But .. like most of this year's been pretty slow for people, so I think a lot of people who are independent .. when [Web4me] started putting the fees up and things were slow, switched to Backpage 'cos they just couldn't afford it. But now it means that there's literally page upon page, like you just keep scrolling. (Judy)

Web4me is a business which epitomises capitalist culture. Their business practices centre around monopolising sex work advertising in New Zealand which gives them the power to charge more than other web platforms. This creates a hierarchical system, which leads to inequalities amongst sex workers. Participants viewed them as professional because they charged more than Backpage. Sex workers who advertised on Backpage, and the clients who accessed sex workers through this platform, were automatically assumed to be 'unprofessional'. Web4me brought status into their advertising packages, which made some sex workers more prestigious than others. The money available for marketing determined the social status of the sex worker, which in turn determined the amount of money they made. This ensures that diamond or gold sex workers stay on the top, and standard sex workers stay on the bottom.

Marketing social status online

Sex workers' online profiles are extremely important. They have to develop a personal brand and market themselves effectively to stand out from others in the competitive environment. Clients in this study indicated that they selected which sex workers they wanted to book based on the reviews of the sex worker, their photos and their description:

It's a combination of how you feel when you've seen a whole, you know, read the reviews, and then seen the pictures and you read the text, and it kind of all, you message the one and you think, "Oh yeah, well, you know, that one sounds like a nice lady I'd like to see and talk to her." (Raymond, client)

The advert itself could not look like a generic, stock-standard one. Clients commented that some adverts lacked authenticity:

You know, there's a lot of marketing that goes on in those ads. ...I think the same applies for the descriptions that I tend to not – well sometimes I read those, but they seem to be so full of spin.... it's like they've been copy-written. Like I can imagine that there would be someone who runs that website who offers kind of a package deal, "We'll take your photos, we'll write your spiel." (Austin, client)

Clients, like Austin, were looking for something that provided a greater insight into the character of the individual sex workers. Sex workers in this study understood and tried to provide this through engaging in the construction of an 'authentic' identity. They did this through the images and language used in their adverts. Photographs are the first thing that

clients see when they click into a web platform. The sex workers in this study therefore put a lot of thought into how they depicted themselves. They studied other photos in an effort to find a point of difference from their competitors as Alice stated:

I'm constantly looking at what [other sex workers are] doing. You know, other BBWs, what are they doing, how do they look in their photos, all that sort of thing, because you've got to know what your competition is. You know, if you don't know, then you know, yeah, you've got to create that level of what to put out there. (Alice)

Sex workers saw photos as important in constructing the values they wanted to portray. Tory wanted clients to see her as: 'quite intimate, because that's just naturally how I am .. I think, nurturing and caring, focused more on the sensuality'. Such feminine, emotional qualities are generally associated with non-commercial relationships. Tory drew on her cultural knowledge to construct the possibility of an intimate encounter for clients. She wondered about the idea of a 'tiered system of sex worker' – neither refuting nor buying into it. She argued that she was not necessarily trying to depict herself as 'high class' but wanted to appear authentic and true to herself.

It's funny, cause I mean there's a lot of conversation around people trying to represent themselves as like elite or high class or using these words as if there's some kind of tiered system of sex worker, you know. But I guess I just wanted to represent myself (...) in a way that made me feel (...) I wanted to look like me, but not look like me. You know, like I didn't want people to recognise me, but I also didn't want to misrepresent myself, cause I went into this being myself. Like when I'm in a session, I'm just me. I don't put on a different character, ... I wanted the photos to be light and I tried to stay away from like thigh-high boots and really dominating kind of attire because I felt like that wasn't actually me, and I can come across like that, I think, just because of the way I look sometimes. But I'm not that, and I didn't want to have to do that. So I tried to represent myself in a softer light. (Tory, sex worker)

A web provider had told her to take some selfies of herself for the website. However, she saw selfies as implying a cheapness. Professional photographs, on the other hand, denote quality:

What they [the web provider] said to me was, "Why don't you just get, why don't you just take some selfies in your bedroom?" and I said, "Because that's not my image. Like that's not the type of photo I want to sell. It's a brand, right, you're selling a brand or you want to portray some kind of image and product." And I said, "I can't do that by taking a photo on my own, you know. (Tory, sex worker)

Tory wanted to represent herself as she imagined herself to be rather than how others may imagine sex workers. Explicit sexual images would not reflect the features she wanted to portray and she distanced herself from this. Instead, her photograph should preferably represent her in the style of a model:

I liked that she [the brothel operator who took the photos] wanted to take these kind of model type beauty pictures, you know, rather than legs akimbo or full on butt shots and stuff like that, ‘cos I just kind of really wasn’t interested in that. (Tory, sex worker)

Tory worked to distance herself from the ‘whore imaginary’ (Carbonero and Gómez Garrido, 2018: 390) and utilised her cultural knowledge to position herself in opposition to this. Most of the sex workers in the study provided similar accounts to Tory – their ‘personality’ was part of their branding:

I like my photos to show my personality, cause I’m quirky and weird, so I like the playful ones. I mean on my photos I’m covered most, pretty covered, because why would you give it away for free? Showing everything, there’s nothing left to the imagination. A lot of men have indicated they like more clothes on so that they can let the mind wander. (Samantha, sex worker)

There is a danger in revealing too much when trying to present an authentic self. There are increasing pressures for sex workers to reveal their face in advertisements. The participant from Web4me suggested that many sex workers are now ‘out’ to their families and therefore should not mind showing their face online. He argued that if they did, they would get more bookings than those who had their faces pixelated or who had a decapitated photo, but denied any coercion:

She shows herself and she’s beautiful and she’s sexy and she’s gorgeous, that’s the way it goes. But we never say to a girl, “You have to show your face or you don’t have to,” strictly, strictly their prerogative....And those who do, they’re the busiest. [Richard, web provider]

A brothel operator echoed this sentiment and illustrated this by showing the interviewer web photographs of the sex workers who worked in her brothel:

Women who have a big smile get far more work than those who don’t. Or women who have that sultry red, bright red lipstick, pouty lips, will get more work than those who are completely decapitated. I know you can’t see this in the thing [photograph], but like this particular woman completely decapitated,– like wouldn’t get as much work, even though she’s got a stunning figure, she’s absolutely gorgeous, as say a woman like same body shape, but look how much face she puts in it. I mean you get a sense of the person. You’re not just a body, and so I don’t encourage women to show face, but I do let them know that, you know, it’s their choice. The more you show, the more work you’ll get, so if that is your number one priority and you’re not so worried about privacy, then go for it. [Sandra, brothel operator]

The choice to show their face or not is framed as entirely up to sex workers, but it comes with a caveat that if they choose not to, they will lose business. This is a dilemma for sex workers in the face of ever-increasing competition on the internet and the desire to present themselves authentically. Alice made the decision not to show her face arguing that the ‘internet is permanent’ and the implication of doing so would have long-term effects

beyond the sex industry. Similarly, Judy indicated that revealing one's face made you 'more vulnerable':

It's something I've noticed becoming more common [to put your face in the advert] really quickly in the last year or so, which is a bit worrying. I don't know that [the web provider] would necessarily directly encourage people to, but because most people still don't have the face, your ad is going to stand out if your face is shown.... So obviously if you're the only person whose face is showing, that's a huge draw.Either people who know you in your personal life recognising you, but also in terms of literally anyone could be looking at that. You don't have any control and you're not able to know who's looking at you 'cos it's through the internet. ... It leaves you a lot more vulnerable. [Judy, sex worker]

The clients interviewed in this study indicated that the description of the sex worker in the advert was also important. It was especially important that the sex worker wrote this themselves as it gave an indication that they were only interested in the 'right' clients. The sex worker would by implication be discerning and therefore more attractive to them. As David stated:

If a blurb is obviously written by the girl and it's making a point, I kind of like that because in my experience the girls that are taking it seriously and want to attract the right people and maybe weed out the wrong people, write their blurb. (David, client)

Brothel operators stated that they did encourage sex workers in their businesses to write their own description but they frequently declined. They argued that if a sex worker was new to sex work, they often had little idea of what to write and it was up to them to step in and do this for them. This led to descriptions often appearing generic:

Often when a woman starts, they don't know how to write about themselves, so often I write it and it's quite generic, and then they often after working for a few years, they change little things. (Sandra, Brothel operator)

Web providers said that most sex workers could not be bothered to write a description themselves and they had little idea of how to market themselves effectively. One web provider tried to encourage sex workers to write their own blurbs and had produced a blog on writing a profile for them, but few had taken this up.

We encourage [the sex workers] to have the profile the way they want it, so we're not going to be controlling and say, 'You must do x, y, z,' but we are going to help to make sure that the profile is beneficial to them. .. Some girls, their descriptions are really short and they try to leave it blank and not describe themselves. We have contacted them and said, "Would you like to add more?" We will just send suggestions saying, "Hey, what about, you know, would you like some help, blah blah blah." Some people aren't (...) savvy when it comes to marketing themselves. (Jessica, web provider)

The other two web providers interviewed indicated that they took sex workers' written descriptions and 'creatively' edited them:

Well they get a form and they can fill out online and then they can say everything about themselves, cause we need their stats, and then they can write about themselves and all that sort of stuff, and then we take that and we add some adjectives and we see the photos, and most of them aren't that creative and that's what our job was was to be creative and make it sound as beautiful as possible. So, "She has beautiful velvet soft skin, and, you know, and perky breasts," or something like that. (Richard, web provider)

Contrary to these web providers' claims, most of the sex workers in this study were unhappy with changes made to the descriptions they had written. They felt that in doing this, their profiles did not reflect their 'character' nor how they wanted themselves represented. They wanted their online profiles to provide a message about themselves, a peek into them as a person. They argued that web providers' depictions of their working identities did not represent their 'authentic' selves and the way they conducted (or wanted to be seen to conduct) their interactions with clients.

The problems I have had with them [web providers] is when they write your set up, she kept adding it on saying at the end of my blurb, "I'm hot for my men. Love, [Esther]," and I would text her. I said, "Would you please remove that because that's not how I would talk." And my blurb's not all, "Oh I 'm so hot and lah lah lah." Mine's very, you know, just really good, and a lot of men say they like my thing that it's not so slimy and – well not slimy, but full of all those words. And it would be removed, and then bugger my days, next time I'd check it, there it was again. You know, so sometimes I think they play with you a bit. ...They will certainly edit it and say, "We want it more..." they have their own style. (Esther, sex worker)

Andrea identified as transsexual. They had a very strong sense of how they wanted to be represented. They enjoyed writing and knew what their clients liked about them. They wanted the calmness of their character to come through in the advert rather than a hypersexualised 'slutty, slut, slut' image, which did not represent them and showed none of their character:

One of the really big things for me has always been in the way that other people advertise me. So when I was there [at a particular brothel] and they would write the profiles about the workers on the website, ... well I just thought I could actually write something much better, and possibly everyone thinks that. And possibly everyone could write something better, but I have felt like the text that other people write about me as my boss is nowhere near, it doesn't have character, it doesn't have my character in it, so I don't feel like they represent the sort of service that I do very well. ... I guess I like writing and I like words and I think that you can make (...) you know, I think that actually even without pictures you can make somebody feel like they have a sense of your sexuality or the way that you are sexy from reading what you've written. So I think that for me it's kind of about that when I write my own ads. It's about putting that into the ads and giving the clients a sense of, you know, like putting

calmness into it, you know, that sort of thing. ... I know what turns people on about me, so I can write about those things. Whereas a brothel owner imagines completely different things. I remember one ... I guess that she thought the clients were into sluts or sluttiness or something, so she kind of wanted to put all this language in the write-up that was really like, “slutty, slut, slut.” That’s not actually in the picture about me. (Andrea, sex worker)

Racialised assumptions were made about the Asian sex workers interviewed in this study. Web providers altered their descriptions and used their ethnicity to play to clients' fantasies on the supposed submissiveness attributed to Asian women.

I'm quite particular about how I advertise myself. ... The fact that they kept trying to think that they knew better than me [was] quite frustrating. My case manager, kept saying, .. “No one will book you. You have to, you know, trust us. We write all the ads for all the Asian girls, you know. You know, like what gets guys who like Asian girls is if you seem simple and innocent and submissive,” and no. But the fact that it took some grappling to get them to even just put up what I wanted them to put up was really frustrating. Like I was paying well over one job's pay every week, when their service couldn't even guarantee me one job a week. (Katie, sex worker)

Katie argued and pushed back and eventually got the blurb that she wanted. Lauren was less proficient in English and so agreed that the Web4me account manager could write her blurb. However, the account manager attempted to attract clients by including the word ‘lonely’, possibly because it would imply that she had few social connections in the country:

Sometime they say [web provider] .. they write in their advertising, .. “I feel lonely. I feel lonely.” I said this is not very good. They said, “This sound good, attractive maybe, yeah, to the customer, client.” I said, “No, I don't like it this words.” ... I said, “I don't feel lonely, I feel poor.” (Laugh) ... I said “Can you change, cause you're writing some lies.” (Lauren, sex worker)

Whilst the account manager on Web4me eventually did alter Lauren's blurb, it took a lot of negotiation: ‘then they changed, yeah, then getting better ...yeah, because for the advertising, the picture and the letter, because they introduce the girls, that's very important’.

Sex worker blogs on marketing emphasise that sex workers need to know the target audience and display their best traits, avoiding clichés ([Jordan Quinn, 2018](#); [Walden, 2020](#)) and ‘crappy innuendo’ ([Rose Crompton, n.d.](#)). Sex workers in this study recognised this and worked hard to differentiate themselves from other sex workers. They utilised their cultural knowledge to craft a marketing approach that would appeal to a high-status clientele. They branded aspects of their personality in the photos and blurbs which were consistent with dominant understandings of ‘good taste’ ([Bourdieu, 1984](#)). They demonstrated agency in challenging brothel operators’ and web providers’ stereotypical assumptions to negotiate a ‘tasteful’ presentation of ‘self’ online.

Discussion

The internet has changed the sex work landscape for indoor sex workers in a number of ways. It has made commercial sex more accessible to clients (Ashford, 2008; Ray, 2007); they examine the adverts online and look at reviews of sex workers before making an informed choice (Cunningham and Kendall, 2011). Clients have become more discerning because they can now spend a lot of time examining advertisements, so an individual sex worker has to find a way to stand out from the crowd in order to attract business. This study set out to look at how sex workers brand and market themselves online, and the role web platforms play in determining the status of sex workers who advertise for clients online. The findings suggest that social status inequalities are reinforced through web platforms and personal branding.

Several authors have written on the commodification of intimacy, arguing that authentic services are highly valued in post-Fordist times (Bernstein, 2007; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Carbonero and Gómez Garrido, 2018). Most sex workers in this study engaged in marketing their ‘authentic’ selves in an effort to create an image of high status and stand out from their competitors. Authenticity is important in the construction of meaningful careers in any field of work (Svejenova, 2005). The incorporation of prestigious qualities into an authentic personal brand has moved the image of the commercial sex industry away from dominant assumptions of seediness, associated with low status (Brents and Hausbeck, 2007). The sex workers in this study thought very deeply about how they represented themselves online. They were complicit in the development of a status hierarchy because of the highly competitive environment online and their need to stand out from others. In line with Duffy and Hund’s (2015) observations of online branding of fashion bloggers, sex workers’ branding online reified traditional conceptions of femininity, such as having a caring and nurturing demeanour. The qualities they emphasised served as markers of respect and prestige, which helped to position them as professional and thus of high status.

To a large extent, Web4me has created the space for the further reinforcement of status stratification or whorearchy amongst direct-contact indoor sex workers in NZ. Sex workers in this study felt compelled to advertise on this platform because to not do so was risky. They may not attract the sort of clients they wanted and they may not earn enough money. Web4me also builds status into the advertising packages that they sell to sex workers. Sex workers can be diamond or gold status if they are able to afford this, which allows them to be more visible to higher status clients than those who can only afford a standard package. High status sex workers are more likely to have the financial means to pay for diamond or gold advertising packages. These are the sex workers who are more likely to attract clients as their adverts appear in the front pages and they therefore earn more money than standard package sex workers. The status system on the website therefore perpetuates inequality amongst online direct-contact sex work in much the same way as Jones (2015a) noted the way camscores create racial and class-based inequalities in webcamming. In other words, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer – or (to borrow from Jones’ title) for poor sex workers, scroll down.

The internet has facilitated a reshaping of sex work but this may not have benefitted all sex workers. There are several sex worker’ blogs which speak of the dangers of

whorearchy. [Lynn \(2019\)](#) likened this to Crab Theory – when crabs try to get out of a bucket they climb over others and pull each other down. The division of sex workers into high and low status creates a lack of unity and division amongst sex workers ([McNeill, 2012](#)) as they try to climb over each other for clients. Tilly Lawless, a queer sex worker and activist, said in an interview with [Sciortino \(2016\)](#) that she constantly felt “judged within the whorearchy..... Escorts describe themselves as ‘high class’ in an attempt to market themselves, which suggests that other workers are low class, and feeds into the whorearchy and the idea that the rest of us are worthless”.

Conclusion

Cultural capital plays a role in reproducing dominant social relations, and because cultural capital is unevenly distributed, it creates inequalities ([Bourdieu 1984; Webb et al., 2006](#)). In this study, sex workers’ social status was prescribed according to commonly held beliefs of what characteristics are valued in society, which then shaped their expectations of themselves ([Bourdieu 1984; Ridgeway 2014](#)). They branded themselves as authentic by displaying valued attributes and advertising on the dominant web platform. Web4me markets itself as a successful business and have strived to monopolise sex work advertising. They have used coercive tactics to restrict sex workers from advertising on alternative platforms and in doing so have effectively reduced the competition. They have also attempted to coerce sex workers into adopting particular stereotypes in order to maximise profits. The status system Web4me have introduced through the advertising packages they offer have cemented a hierarchy amongst sex workers. This hierarchy perpetuates inequalities and creates a divide amongst sex workers, and it will not be easy to change the status quo. Sex work is a business (in NZ’s decriminalised environment it is purportedly a business like any other) and marketing to gain advantage over competitors is part of any business’s practices. Social status is the most powerful tool sex workers currently have in their marketing toolkit. It may be some time until direct-contact indoor sex workers in NZ see an end to the status hierarchy given the large market share for commercial sex advertising that Web4me has in NZ. Their first challenge, however, is to address this stranglehold.

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Notes

1. There was another NZ web platform at the time that we interviewed for the study, which has since closed down. In addition, Backpage closed down three to 4 months after interviewing was completed.
2. The last estimation of the number of sex workers in the major cities in NZ was done in 2007. This indicated that approximately 62% of sex workers are based in Auckland (Abel et al., 2009). There is unlikely to have been much change in the proportion of sex workers across the cities since this time.

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